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ABSTRACT

This study examines patterns of student attrition and retention in the Omaha (Nebraska) Public Schools (OPS). The following dropout characteristics were studied: (1) low socioeconomic status (SES); (2) minority group membership; (3) low achievement test scores; (4) low academic grades; (5) enrollment in a nonacademic (vocational or general) high school program; and (6) problem behaviors, including delinquency and truancy. The following findings are presented: (1) minority group students comprise 32.8 percent of the student population; (2) minority group student attendance rates at traditional schools are markedly higher than at Individualized Study Centers (ISCs), which serve students with behavior problems; (2) parental influence, lack of interest, and poor attendance (in that order) were cited by dropouts as reasons for leaving school; (3) suspension rates for Black and Hispanic American OPS students were higher than national averages; and (4) minority group high school students, with the exception of Asian Americans, demonstrate significantly higher attrition rates than White students. Statistical data are presented in five tables. A list of eight references is appended. (FMW)

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STUDENT RETENTION AND THE OMAHA PUBLIC SCHOOLS: PERFORMANCE AND CHALLENGE

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Student Retention and the Omaha Public Schools: Performance and Challenge

One constant in current writings on the American educational system, and particularly reform literature, is concern over the significant number of students who fail to graduate from high school. The high number of nongraduates in urban districts is received with particular concern, as this heavily affects racial minorities, who make up a significant number if not a substantial majority of the total school population in the large cities across the country. Failure to complete high school severely handicaps individuals' abilities to acquire the resources necessary for even a marginally satisfactory lifestyle. There is almost universal agreement of the necessity to develop and implement programs and strategies to retain students in school.

A review of the literature reveals an abundance of material on the possible causal factors in attrition and retention.[1,2] The findings include:

- Previous research has indicated that high school attrition is related to background, achievement and attitudes, and individual behaviors.
- The two background characteristics that are most strongly related to dropping out are socioeconomic status (SES) and race/ethnicity. Students of lower SES have been consistently shown to have higher dropout rates than high SES students. Dropout occurs more often among Hispanics than among Blacks, and more often among Blacks than Whites. Other background factors associated with dropout include coming from a single-parent family, coming from a large family, and living in the South or in a large city.
- Low academic achievement, as indicated by low test scores and low grades, has also been consistently associated with high school attrition. Low scores on standardized tests have been found to be good predictors of dropout. Academic failure, as indicated by low grades, is also consistently related to dropout. Students who become dropouts have been shown to be dissatisfied with school and to have lower self-esteem. Students with no plans for postsecondary education have also been shown more likely to become dropouts.
- Student behaviors that have been found to be associated with dropout include enrollment in a nonacademic (vocational or general) curriculum and problem behaviors such as delinquency and truancy. Other researchers have pointed out the role that employment during high school and pregnancy play in dropout.

Although there continues to be controversy over some of these conclusions, the range of discussion is well summarized in the above survey of the findings.

The Omaha Public School District (OPS) is the largest district in Nebraska. It has a current enrollment of just over 41,000 students, a full-time staff of 4,366, and 1,176 part-time employees. The student and staff populations are ethnically and racially diverse with 32.8 percent of the student body representing racial minorities (Black, Native American, Asian-Pacific Island, and Hispanic). The school district serves 54 percent of the entire state's minority public

school population, including 81 percent of all the state's Blacks, 20 percent of the Native Americans, and 22 percent of the Hispanics. With an annual current budget of $156 million, OPS is one of the largest governmental subdivisions in Nebraska.

The Board of Education has declared its intention to maintain an integrated school system. This step was initially mandated by court action in 1976 but is currently Board-determined policy (court supervision ended with the beginning of the 1984-1985 school year).

The issue of student retention focuses around two dimensions: children who fail to learn, or dropouts; and schools that fail to teach, or pushouts. Although the two are related, a dropout is seen as due more to factors beyond the school's control or influence, while the pushout is linked to school policy, programs or procedures, and the general school environment.

A statistical assessment of retention is likely to look at rates of school attendance, rates of withdrawals, and numbers of suspensions/expulsions. Of course, retention rates are affected by non-quantitative measures such as the attitudes of staff, intervention programs, philosophy of principals and administration leadership, support services for staff to develop alternative learning strategies, and a host of other such factors. The public and media tend to focus on the statistical measures, but school staff argue that numbers fail to grasp the real picture of the efforts and accomplishments being made. Of course, the numbers, for better or worse, will always be in the forefront of any discussion.

Attendance figures for OPS are quite high, with attendance ranging from 93.2 to 96.7 percent for elementary schools, 91.9 to 94.7 percent for junior high schools, and 89.9 to 94.4 percent for senior highs (table 1). The figures for the non-traditional school settings – the Individualized Study Centers (ISCs) – are markedly lower, ranging from 72.3 to 78.4 percent (table 2). The three ISCs provide a partial-day, self-paced curriculum (generally two hours a day) and service students with drug or alcohol problems, those with difficulties in relating satisfactorily to the traditional school setting, reassignments from the traditional junior/senior

Table 1: Senior High Schools - Enrollments/Attendance

School 1987-88	Enrollments	Percer Minor	Percent Attendance
North	1,216	37.8	89.9
Northwest	1,418	37.3	92.8
Benson	1,407	36.9	91.4
Central	2,091	31.1	93.9
South	1,584	25.5	92.5
Bryan	1,482	22.6	93.2
Burke	1,831	22.5	94.4

Source: OPS, Division of Research.

Table 2: Individualized Study Centers - Enrollment/Attendance

ISC	1987-88 Enrollment	Percent Minority	Percent Attendance
CCOE#3	308	44.6	72.3
ISC#1	279	30.2	78.4
ISC#2	388	46.8	78.1

Source: OPS, Division of Research.

schools for repeated rules violations, and so on. ISC students are among the highest dropout risks.

Withdrawal statistics, based on state-determined categories, are noted in table 3. The data are not particularly useful in generalizing as to why students formally leave school, because little specific information is provided to amplify the category (generally the counselor checks a box on a form). Close to one-third leave because of lack of interest or poor attendance, but the largest category is "parental influence," which lacks specificity.

Table 3: Withdrawals By Race 1987-88

	Total		White		Black		Native American		Asian		Hispanic	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Behavioral problems	85	5.6	34	40	47	55	3	4	0	0	1	-
Parental influence	668	44.2	472	71	142	21	15	2	2	-	38	6
Lack of interest	122	8.1	98	80	16	13	1	-	1	-	6	5
Excessive absence	304	20.1	177	58	103	34	16	5	0	-	8	3
All other†	330	21.8	197	60	117	35	7	2	3	-	6	2
Total			977	65	425	28	42	3	6	04	59	4

†No category included in "All Other" had more than 18, with the exception of "Other Known Reasons" (174) and "Unknown Reasons" (85).

Source: OPS, Division of Research.

Data on suspensions (table 4) include total incidents. If the suspension is for multiple reasons, only the most serious offense is recorded in the statistics. A 1988 report issued by the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (N.C.A.S) compared the 100 largest U.S. school districts. This report was based on 1986 statistics provided by the U.S. Office of Civil Rights, and it found that OPS had a high minority suspension rate. A January 10, 1989, report by the OPS Coordinator of Research commented on the NCAS Report.

> Overall, the 1986 suspension rate in Omaha was slightly higher (7.337%) than the "Largest 100 Districts" average (6.66%). Compared to 100 district means, the rate for Whites was slightly below the average (0.08%) while the rate for Hispanics was above the average (1.37%.) and highest for Blacks (+2.79%).
>
> No information was available concerning prevailing procedures, policies, or other circumstances relative to suspensions within individual districts.

In examining the categories of suspensions, one sees that over half occur in areas of misconduct that could be characterized as disorderly behavior, verbal challenge to authority or failure to respond to directives, and truancy and tardiness (52.2 percent of all incidents listed under Lesser Offenses and Minor Offenses in table 4).

Suspension categories in which Blacks are vastly overrepresented in comparison to their 27 percent of the total school population include: assault (61 percent), disruption of learning (60 percent), verbal threat (59 percent), fighting (56 percent), theft/property damage (55 percent), vulgarity (50 percent), and refusal to cooperate (47 percent).

Table 5 provides data on attrition rates on a longitudinal basis, using enrollment statistics in tracking movement of students from the 10th grade through graduation. Because the numbers track only entire categories (not individuals) factors such as mobility, transfer, death, etc., are not controlled. The assumption is that there are not factors unique to race that would dis-

Table 4: Total OPS Suspensions by Reason, by Race, 1987-88

			Black		White		Hispanic	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Service Offenses								
Assault	314	5.7	193	61.4	116	36.9	5	0.02
Weapon	107	1.9	41	38.3	62	57.9	4	0.03
Drugs/alcohol	103	1.9	38	36.8	62	60.1	3	0.02
Total	524	9.5						
Moderate Offenses								
Theft/property damage	190	3.4	105	55.2	77	40.5	8	0.04
Fighting	966	17.5	539	55.7	408	42.2	19	0.02
Verbal threat	123	2.2	73	593	46	37.3	4	0.03
Total	1,279	23.1						
Lesser Offenses								
Vulgarity	221	4.0	112	50.6	104	47.0	5	0.02
Refusal to cooperate	633	11.5	295	46.6	328	51.8	10	0.02
Disruption of learning	336	6.1	203	60.4	126	37.5	7	0.02
Cumulative misconduct	657	11.9	291	44.3	339	51.6	72	10.9
Total	1,847	33.5						
Minor Offenses								
Attendance	534	9.8	99	18.5	424	79.4	11	0.02
Tardiness	488	8.9	155	31.7	310	635	23	0.04
Total	1,022	18.7						
All other	846	15.2	319	38	508	60	19	2

Source: Report to Staff & Student Personnel Services Committee ofthe Board of Education, February 27, 1989.

proportionately impact on one group more than another. The data indicate an attrition rate between 1986 sophomores and 1988 high school graduates from a low of 10 percent for Asians to a high of 56 percent for Native Americans. The Hispanic rate was 34 percent; White 26 percent; and Black 44 percent. The school-age population in this three-year period was very stable, removing one variable that might skew the outcome. It is also likely that a number of individuals graduated after completing summer school following the normal May graduation day. Nevertheless, the data indicate a significant attrition rate after the sophomore year for all groups with racial minority rates (other than Asians') significantly greater than Whites'.

A national study tracking high school sophomores from 1980 through their high school graduations in 1982 found that, of those who did drop out, 30 percent left during the 10th grade, 44 percent during the 11th grade, and 26 percent during the 12th grade.[3] The study concluded that "the critical variables related to dropping out are school performance, as measured by grades, and extent of problem behavior. These variables are more important in explaining dropout behavior than sophomore ability, as measured by test scores."[4] The home educational support system was seen to determine in part the behavioral problem and grades. Staying in school increased achievement gains in all tested areas regardless of ethnicity, gender, or curriculum choice.[5] In looking to solutions, the study saw the need for three types of programs:

Table 5: Attrition Rates 1985-1988

Grade	Year	Native American	Asian	Hispanic	Black	White
				– Number (Change) –		
10th	Fall 1985	41	48	79	882	2,342
11th	Fall 1986	31 (-24%)	53 (+10%)	86 (+8%)	720 (-18%)	2,136 (-9%)
12th	Fall 1987	21 (-32%)	42 (-22%)	63 (-27%)	638 (-11%)	1,938 (-9%)
Graduated-May 1988		18 (-16%)	43 (+5%)	52 (-17%)	491 (-23%)	1,722 (-11%)
				– Percent Change –		
Attrition between 9th grade and graduation		-56	-10	-34	-44	-26
				– Number –		
Total School Population 1985/1988		506/ 545	439/ 454	1,161/ 1,364	11,217/ 11,236	28,309/ 27,933

Source: OPS, Division of Research.

(1) programs to help pregnant teenagers remain in school; (2) programs to help youth with economic needs combine work and education; and (3) programs directed toward students who perform poorly because they are dissatisfied with the school environment.[6]

In November 1987 the Omaha Public Schools Superintendent's Task Force on Student Dropouts issued a report following a study that lasted more than a year. The task force recommended the continuation of existing programs serving at-risk students as well as the initiation of new programs and steps. Among the latter were more intervention and assistance in skills development in the primary grades, expansion of preschool programs, inclusion of elementary counselors into the school system, parenting education and communication programs, external support programs involving business and community agencies, the development of a case management or intervention specialist model staffed by professionals who work with referred students, and further staff training on programs that focus on at-risk students. The task force concluded it "believes the most important factor in preventing students from dropping out of school is a community of caring adults."[8]

A variety of programs is currently in place, and the district is moving toward implementation of a number of the Task Force recommendations.

Endnotes

1. Ekstrom, Ruth B., Margaret E. Goertz, Judith M. Pollack, Donald A. Rock, "Who Drops Out of High School and Why? Findings From a National Study, "in Gary Natriello, ed., *School Dropouts*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1986; p. 53.
2. *Civil Rights Survey Comparisons 1984, 1986 and 1988* Division of Research, Omaha Public Schools, January 10, 1989.
3. Ekstrom, op. cit, p. 54.
4. *Ibid*, pp. 66-67.
5. *Ibid*
6. *Ibid*
7. *Ibid*
8. Omaha Public Schools, "Omaha Public Schools Superintendent's Task Force on Student Dropouts Recommendations," November 23, 1987.